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RUEHFK/AMCONSUL FUKUOKA IMMEDIATE 1240
RUEHNH/AMCONSUL NAHA IMMEDIATE 3601
RUEHOK/AMCONSUL OSAKA KOBE IMMEDIATE 5031
RUEHKS/AMCONSUL SAPPORO IMMEDIATE 1811
RUEHIN/AIT TAIPEI IMMEDIATE 7199
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC IMMEDIATE
RUCPDO/DEPT OF COMMERCE WASHINGTON DC IMMEDIATE
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC IMMEDIATE
RHHMUNA/HQ USPACOM HONOLULU HI IMMEDIATE
RHEHAAA/NSC WASHDC IMMEDIATE
RUEATRS/TREASURY DEPT WASHDC IMMEDIATE
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TOKYO 003301

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SUBJECT: ASO'S SUPPORT FALLS; ANTI-ASO MOVES INSIDE LDP

Classified By: Ambassador J. Thomas Schieffer, reasons 1.4(b),(d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Support for Prime Minister Taro Aso is in freefall, based on the results of the latest opinion polls. Verbal gaffes, policy miscues, a perceived inability to deal with the global economic crisis, and growing discontent within his own party have called Aso's leadership into question. Media reports are focusing on the growing "anti-Aso" movement within the LDP. A contact within the senior LDP ranks has even told the Embassy that losing the next election and becoming the opposition party may be the best thing for the LDP. End summary.

¶2. (C) Support for the Aso Cabinet has nose-dived over the past month, with current support levels in the upper 20s to low 30s, and non-support ranging from the upper 50s to the low 60s, according to two recent polls (detailed polling data will be reported septel). Most political commentators in Japan consider anything below 30 percent to be in the danger zone, where forced resignation becomes a possibility. Worse still, Aso has lost ground to opposition Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) leader Ichiro Ozawa as the more popular choice for next Prime Minister. As recently as last month, Aso out-stripped Ozawa by a wide margin in nearly every poll. Now the two are close to even, receiving about 17 percent support each as the preferred Prime Minister.

¶3. (C) A combination of verbal miscues, public skepticism of Aso's economic plan and the popular image of Aso as a rich, bar-hopping old-style LDP politico, lowered his approval ratings in slightly over two months to levels it took nearly a year for predecessors Abe and Fukuda to reach.

¶4. (C) Increasing numbers of LDP Diet members, at all levels of seniority, are turning their backs on Aso. Several "anti-Aso" movements within the ruling LDP, including one led by former Administrative Reform Minister Yoshimi Watanabe and former Chief Cabinet Secretary Yasuhisa Shiozaki have formed according to media reports. The Watanabe-Shiozaki group has attracted two dozen members, and is expected to add another dozen or so shortly. Disaffected LDP members focus their criticism on Aso's refusal to submit a second supplementary budget before the end of the year, and have added their voices to those of the opposition DPJ in calling for an early election. A second group, to be led by former LDP Secretary General Hidenao Nakagawa and former Defense Minister Yuriko Koike, is expected to be formed on December 5, with the

stated goal of reforming the nation's social security system.

Only a handful of LDP veterans, such as former Prime Minister Mori, continue to back Aso wholeheartedly.

LDP Leader: Losing Could Be Good!

15. (C) At this point, a number of LDP members are trying to put the best face on what will likely be a drubbing for the ruling coalition in the next election. Although the Prime Minister is not required to call an election until September 2009, more party members are openly wondering if it is time to replace Aso with someone who can better lead the LDP and turn its fortunes around.

16. (C) Agriculture Minister and LDP leader Shigeru Ishiba, echoing the comments of several other Embassy interlocutors, noted on Monday, December 1 to Embassy political officers that he could not think of anyone to replace Aso at the moment. Ishiba speculated that if the DPJ won the next election, the party would split apart along ideological lines between pro-U.S. Alliance conservatives like Seiji Maehara and Akihisa Nagashima, and alliance critics on the left like Katsuya Okada, Naoto Kan and Takahiro Yokomichi. Ishiba said he hoped a new pro-defense, pro-U.S. Alliance grouping of young Diet members would emerge in the wake of a DPJ electoral win and ensuing failure to govern, noting it would be a "good thing" in this sense for the LDP to lose and spend time as the opposition.

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More Gridlock?

17. (C) Comment: Ishiba's victory-in-defeat theory shows how pessimistic and dispirited the LDP has become. Most LDP leaders are resigned to eventual defeat by the DPJ and to being relegated to being the opposition until a hoped-for, but uncertain, political realignment takes place. It is an unfortunate development for Japan that, at the moment the country faces both an economic crisis and demands for enhanced national security and defense policies, the government is paralyzed by political gridlock.
SCHIEFFER